The Cosmological Primacy of Keyumars: Mountain Spaces, Lithic Articulations, and Body Aesthetics in the Dawn of Iranian Visual Culture.

From Mythic Primordium to Material Horizon: Spatiality, Vestment, and Rock Art in the Episteme of the First Human-King.

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Persian Art Chronicle is an independent long-form research project by Maryam Gomizi dedicated to documenting, analyzing, and interpreting the history of Iranian art from mythical antiquity to the contemporary era through an interdisciplinary artistic and scholarly perspective.

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Abstract:

This study re-examines Keyumars—the human and foundational sovereign in Iranian cosmological traditions—by testing mythic narratives against the physical reality of the Iranian plateau. Moving beyond philological debate the paper applies spatial semiotics, material culture and cultural memory theory across three core domains: mountain and cave spatiality, functional lithic production and the aesthetics of the leopard-skin vestment (palang-pūshī). By reading Ferdowsi's Shahnameh alongside the Caspian Mesolithic and Neolithic records from Hotu and Kamarband caves we trace how early communities mapped their cognitive environments.

The analysis extends to the -Paleolithic rock art of Mirmallas in Lorestan framing these petroglyphs as early graphic storytelling rather than random prehistoric marks. Historiographically the paper critiques the contrasting models of Arthur Christensen and Mehrdad Bahar regarding Indo- Near Eastern origins. Ultimately Keyumars functions not as a historical king but as an autochthonous epistemological model. It represents the conceptual shift on the plateau from raw environment to structured space from stone tool to artistic thought and from wild animal hide to sovereign political identity.

Keywords: Keyumars, Proto-Iranian Mythology, Spatial Semiotics, Hotu and Kamarband Caves, Mirmallas Rock Art, Body Aesthetics, Material Culture, Historiography, Cultural Memory.

1-Introduction:

Any serious inquiry into visual culture must begin at the blurry boundary where mythic memory meets material evidence. In the Iranian textual traditions—and later in Ferdowsi's monumental Shahnameh—Keyumars (Avestan: Gaya Marətan, "Mortal Life") holds a central position. He is framed as both the human and the inaugural monarch who sparked social order tool-making and structural transformation. Conventional histories often dismiss these opening chapters as mere courtly fictions designed to legitimize dynasties. Yet a closer phenomenological look reveals something more interesting: the Keyumars narrative preserves a deep cultural memory of how early humans on the plateau first developed spatial awareness, tool technology and aesthetic identity.

This paper builds a bridge between text and archaeological evidence. The goal is not harmonization—forcing prehistoric strata to "prove" epic poetry or using the Shahnameh as an excavation manual. Instead, both written traditions and physical artifacts are treated as expressions of early cognitive growth.

By analyzing the mountain and cave as spatial matrices the knapping of stone tools as the origin of formal design the ochre paintings of Mirmallas and the semiotics of leopard-skin vestments this study reconstructs the earliest layers of Iranian visuality. Keyumars emerges not as a figure but as an intellectual framework through which early plateau societies organized their transition from ecological embedding to intentional cultural, visual and political life.

2-Historical and Cultural Context:

To grasp the role of Keyumars in culture one must trace his evolution across different linguistic and theological strata. In the cosmogony recorded in Middle Persian Pahlavi texts like the Bundahishn ("Primal Creation") Gaya Marətan is created by Ahura Mazda as the sixth primordial creation fashioned directly from earth. He is described as radiant, spherical and containing the prototype of all humanity. When he dies under the assault of the destructive spirit Angra Mainyu his seed falls into the soil. Forty years later it gives rise to the human couple, Mashya and Mashyana while his metallic substance transforms into the minerals and gold of the earth.

Later medieval historians—notably al-Tabari, al-Masudi and al-Biruni—faced the challenge of reconciling this Zoroastrian chronology with Islamic Abrahamic models. In their accounts Keyumars was often aligned with or mapped onto biblical figures like Adam or Noah. This process stripped him of his cosmic pre-human essence and reshaped him into a historical king: the founder of the Pishdadian dynasty.

This transformation reaches its peak in Ferdowsi’s tenth-century Shahnameh. In the opening lines of the epic Keyumars loses his dualistic theological duties but keeps his foundational status:

Keyumars was the first to assume the crown and throne of sovereignty.

He established his dwelling in the mountains.

And clothed himself and his people in the skins of leopards.

Figure 1. The Court of Keyumars illustrated folio from the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp (c. 1522–1525) Attributed to Sultan Muhammad. Note the visual codification of the mountain throne and the court adorned in leopard pelts (palang-pūshī). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ferdowsi binds Keyumars to two material realities: the mountain dwelling and leopard-pelt clothing (palang-pūshī). This literary framing preserves a social memory of a pre-urban pre-agricultural mode of existence within a sophisticated courtly epic. It is this material combination—mountain habitat, early lithic technology and animal vestment—that bridges the gap between myth and the actual prehistoric archaeological sequence of the Iranian plateau.

3- Literature Review:

Scholarly work on Keyumars was long dominated by linguistics and mythology. The foundational Western study came from Danish Iranologist Arthur Christensen in his multi-volume work Les types du premier homme et du premier roi dans l'histoire légendaire des Iraniens (1917–1934). Christensen traced Indo- Indo-European roots, connecting Keyumars to the Germanic Ymir and Vedic Yama. Through this lens Keyumars was analyzed primarily as an abstract linguistic construct

belonging to an ancient pastoralist pantheon—isolated from the physical reality of the Iranian plateau.

In the -twentieth century Iranian scholarship spearheaded by Mehrdad Bahar (Pazhoheshi dar Asatir-e Iran) offered a major course correction. Bahar argued that Iranian mythology was not simply imported by migrating Indo- nomads from Central Asia. Instead, he demonstrated that these traditions synthesized heavily with the agricultural civilizations of the ancient Near East and indigenous plateau cultures like the Elamites. For Bahar, the death of Keyumars and the origin of metals from his body mirrored Mesopotamian cosmogonies like the Enuma Elish, where the universe is forged from Tiamats body. While Christensen and Bahar defined the debate neither fully addressed the material and visual record. In decades archaeologists and art historians have begun filling this gap.

Mid-century excavations at Hotu and Kamarband caves by Louis Dupree and Carleton Coon provided concrete data on Mesolithic and Neolithic life along the Caspian coast. Meanwhile studies of Iranian rock art—initiated by Toman Nasri and expanded by later researchers at Mirmallas and Homiyan in Lorestan—offered visual evidence of early spatial cognition and symbolic communication. What remains missing is a synthesis that maps the physical details of the Keyumars narrative directly onto these archaeological and iconographic finds.

4-Theoretical Framework:

To bridge the gap between narrative and physical artifacts this study uses a three-part theoretical framework: spatial semiotics, material culture studies and cultural memory theory. To analyze landscape and space we turn to Ernst Cassirer’s theory of space (Mythischer Raum) combined with Jan Assmann’s concept of "cultural memory" (Kulturelles Gedächtnis). Cassirer reminds us that early human consciousness does not perceive space as a mathematical grid. Instead, space is emotional divided between profane ordered center and chaotic wild. Assmann shows how societies anchor their core identity in myths attached to specific landscapes and physical objects. Here the mountain and cave in the Keyumars narrative are not geographical settings; they are primary symbolic forms through which early plateau communities structured their worldview.

For stone tools and vestments, we draw on André Leroi-Gourhan’s material theory and Roland Barthes’s semiotics. Leroi-Gourhan’s chaîne opératoire (sequence) shows that shaping stone tools is directly linked to the birth of formal thought and language. Tool-making is thought

made visible in stone. Meanwhile Barthes's The Fashion System helps explain how animal hide moves from thermal survival to a sign system. The leopard pelt stops being hide and becomes a visual marker of human power and social role. Finally, our visual analysis of rock art adapts Erwin Panofsky's approach. By moving from form recognition to symbolic meaning, we read the petroglyphs of Mirmallas not as casual markings but as a deliberate visual language that parallels epic narrative traditions.

5-Main Analysis:

Analyzing the Keyumars story requires moving beyond text to inspect the physical reality of the Iranian plateau. To trace Iranian visuality this analysis works across four connected themes: space (from cave to mountain throne) stone tool craft (the origin of abstract form) rock art (early graphic storytelling) and animal hide vestments (the birth of body aesthetics).

I. Spatiality: The Cave, the Mountain and early Spatial Cognition:

The Shahnameh sets the start of culture in the mountain: "He established his dwelling in the mountains" (gərāmi jahān-jūy kūh rāst). Across the plateau mountains define the natural landscape. Mythologically ranges like the Alborz and Zagros form the worlds backbone (Hara Barezaiti, in Avestan)—an axis connecting depth, earth and sky.

Figure 2. Stratigraphic trench and excavation profile of Hotu Cave, Mazandaran, documenting late Pleistocene and early Holocene human occupation sequences on the northern slopes of the Alborz range.

When we look at the Pleistocene and early Holocene archaeological record, the cave and rock shelter take center stage. Excavations at Hotu and Kamarband (Belt) caves on the slopes of the Alborz offer clear evidence of long-term human occupation.

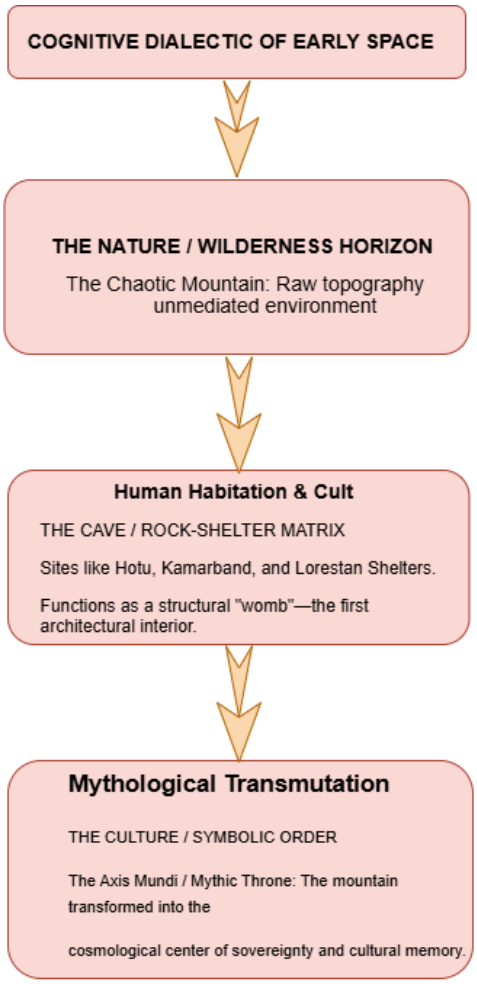
COGNITIVE DIALECTIC OF EARLY SPACE
THE NATURE / WILDERNESS HORIZON
The Chaotic Mountain: Raw topography unmediated environment
Human Habitation & Cult
THE CAVE / ROCK-SHELTER MATRIX
Sites like Hotu, Kamarband, and Lorestan Shelters.
Functions as a structural "womb"—the first architectural interior.
Mythological Transmutation
THE CULTURE / SYMBOLIC ORDER
The Axis Mundi / Mythic Throne: The mountain transformed into the
cosmological center of sovereignty and cultural memory.

Figure 3. Structural diagram illustrating the evolutionary path of vestimentary semiotics from functional thermal utility to political charisma (farr) on the Iranian plateau. Designed by the author.

The layers in these caves show life from the Paleolithic through Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Early groups hunted gazelle, red deer and seals slowly shifting toward goat and sheep domestication and early ceramics. Phenomenologically the cave acts as an enclosure—the first indoor space humans experienced. It offered shelter and safety turning a landscape into a centered

home. Memory of this cave stage lived on in the Keyumars myth. Moving from the cave (seen at Hotu and Kamarband) to the mythic mountain throne reflects a major leap in spatial thought.

The mountain became more than a resource zone; it became a symbol. By sitting atop the peak Keyumars turned topography into a cosmic center. Establishing authority at the natural point set a template for representing power—a theme that echoes through later Iranian architecture from the rock tombs of Naqsh-e Rostam to the cliff carvings of Taq-e Bostan.

II. Lithic Articulations: The Genesis of Formal Thought and Functional Art:

The Shahnameh credits the shaping of the material world to Keyumars and his successor Hushang. The real physical origins of this transformation lie in the Paleolithic and Neolithic stone tool assemblages of the plateau. The shift from using natural stones to systematically crafting standardized tools marks the true beginning of formal artistic thinking in Iran.

Archaeological finds across the plateau—from Zagros sites like Shanidar to cave sequences—show a clear technological evolution. In the Mesolithic and Neolithic layers of Kamarband and Hotu archaeologists unearthed a refined microblade industry featuring geometric microliths, lunates and backed blades designed for composite hunting and harvesting tools.

Figure 4. Early Neolithic ceramic sherds recovered during mid-twentieth-century excavations at Hotu Cave by Carleton Coon, representing the foundational material shift on the plateau. University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives.

From a material culture perspective shaping a microlith requires abstract visualization. The artisan must imagine a geometric form inside an irregular nodule of chert or flint. As Leroi-Gourhan noted, this process creates a feedback loop between hand, eye and mind. The natural limits of stone guide action while human intent forces a deliberate shape onto the raw material.

These flint artifacts were not just survival gear; they represent the functional art on the Iranian plateau. They reveal the emergence of symmetry, rhythm and balance—the design principles that later shaped Sialk painted ceramics and the stone reliefs of Persepolis. Epic tradition simply condenses thousands of years of tool mastery into the figure of the foundational king who first subdues material nature.

III. Graphic Narratives: The Petroglyphs of Mirmallas and Visual Memory:

This technological growth culminated in rock art—the direct inscription of human thought onto natural stone faces. The Mirmallas rock shelter in Lorestan offers one of the vivid examples of this early graphic impulse. Rendered in black ochre the Mirmallas pictographs depict hunting scenes, wild animals, human figures and geometric signs. While dating rock art remains complex due to weathering scholars generally place the Mirmallas horizons between the post-Paleolithic/Mesolithic and Bronze Age.

Figure 5. Post-Paleolithic/Mesolithic red ochre pictographs from the Mirmallas rock-shelter, Lorestan, depicting formalized zoomorphic iconography and hunting narratives that parallel the epic tensions of the mythic corpus.

Table 1: Comparative Matrix: Mythic Text vs. Visual Prehistory.

Analytical Domains	**Shahnameh Narrative (Epic Memory)**	**Archaeological Evidence (Material Record)**
Spatiality	• Mountain Dwelling • Axis Mundi • Cosmic Center	• Cave Habitats (Hotu/Kamarband) • Topographical Adaptation • Structural "Womb" Interiors
Vestment	• Leopard-Skin (*Palang-pushi*) • Identity Signifier • Domination over Beasts	• Animal Bone/Hide Processing • Awls & Scrapers (Lithic) • Emergence of Dress Semiotics
Graphic Expression	• Verbal Description of the Primordial Hunt and Martial Prowess	• Mirmallas Petroglyphs • Dynamic Pictorial Narratives • Zoomorphic Iconography

From an iconological standpoint Mirmallas represents a structured system of visual memory. The prominent ibex (Capra aegagrus) with curving horns is not a passive copy of nature; it is a stylized ideogram. On the plateau the ibex stood for fertility, water and protection—a symbol that survived for millennia on pottery and Lorestan bronzes.

The hunting scenes at Mirmallas mirror the tension of the Keyumars story: humanitys ongoing struggle against wild predatory forces. In the Shahnameh this conflict manifests in the battle between Keyumars's son Siamak and the Black Demon (Div-e Siyah). The Mirmallas drawings show that before written texts or court poetry early communities used graphic art to map their relationship with nature record shared stories and anchor their memory to the mountain.

IV. Body Aesthetics: The Leopard-Skin Vestment (Palang-Pūshī) as Visual Signifier:

The distinct visual element linked to Keyumars is his choice of clothing: "He clothed himself and his people in the skins of leopards" (bāpushad hamī khwīsh o bā khayl-gāh / palangīna bāshīd pūshish tabāh). This detail is more than a touch describing primitive life; it marks the birth of body ornamentation, fashion and social identity on the plateau.

In nature animal hide serves a thermal purpose. Selecting, hunting, processing and wearing leopard pelts as a recognized uniform transforms the hide into a cultural sign. The palang-pūshī operates on two levels:

1. Distinction from Nature: Wearing the skin of an apex predator demonstrates dominance over wild fauna. The wild animal is absorbed into culture.

2. Social Hierarchy: Keyumars leads because he commands the skill and power to wear the symbol of feline strength. The vestment becomes linked to royal authority and divine charisma (farr).

Figure 6. Structural diagram illustrating the evolutionary path of vestimentary semiotics from functional thermal utility to political charisma (farr) on the Iranian plateau. Designed by the author.

This dress code showed staying power. In Persian manuscript painting across the Ilkhanid, Timurid and Safavid eras Keyumars is consistently shown on his mountain throne, surrounded by courts clothed in leopard pelts. The motif later re-emerges with the hero Rostam and his feline coat the babr-e bayan. The practical roots of this tradition are visible in the bone awls, flint scrapers and hide-processing tools recovered from layers at Hotu and Kamarband. The myth simply codified hide-working into an enduring visual paradigm.

6- Discussion: Historiographical Reassessment (Christensen vs. Bahar)

Re-evaluating the Keyumars myth requires looking at the two main historical models that shaped past scholarship. Arthur Christensen and Mehrdad Bahar offered different views on how cultural memory formed on the plateau.

Table 2: Historiographical Dialectic on the Origins of Proto-Iranian Cosmological Myths.

Historiographical Schools	Core Methodology	Primary Focus	Epistemological Limitation
Christensen's Paradigm	Indo-European Philology	Textual Comparative Focus & Nomadic Pastoralist Roots	Treats the plateau as an empty, passive geographic stage for imported myths.
Bahar's Paradigm	Near Eastern Synthesism	Indigenous Plateau Civilizations & Mesopotamian Structural Links	Explains structural myths through cross-regional diffusion, occasionally bypassing local continuous ecology.
Integrated Materialist Model	Spatial Semiotics & Archaeology	Local Plateau Continuity via Site Sequences & Chaîne Opératoire	Requires navigating vast temporal gaps between prehistoric strata and medieval codifications.

Christensen’s approach, rooted in 20th-century philology treated Keyumars through comparative texts. He linked Avestan Gaya Marətan to Vedic Yama and Germanic Ymir viewing the myth as imported baggage brought by migrating Indo- groups. While textually sound Christensen’s model treats the plateau as an empty stage ignoring the indigenous populations already living there.

Mehrdad Bahar challenged this view by looking to Mesopotamian and Elamite civilizations. Bahar showed that Iranian mythology was a construct pointing out that the sacrifice of Keyumars and the origin of metals from his body shared key structures with Near Eastern myths like the Enuma Elish. Both models leave a gap regarding local material context. The archaeological

evidence from Caspian caves and Lorestan rock art points to a perspective: deep continuous localized adaptation on the plateau itself. The focus on mountains, stone tools and wild hides reflects a living memory that predates both Zoroastrian theology and Indo-Aryan language arrival. Keyumars is best understood not as an imported Indo-European deity or a Mesopotamian dying king but as an autochthonous framework through which plateau communities rationalized their own long-term development. An interdisciplinary study must avoid -archaeological jumps and anachronistic claims. Archaeology and mythology represent categories of knowledge. Artifacts offer data on technology and climate; they cannot "prove" the personal existence of a mythic figure like Keyumars. Myth operates through truth and shared identity.

The main methodological challenge is the -millennial gap separating Mesolithic sites or Mirmallas petroglyphs from medieval codifications, like the Shahnameh. Claiming that Mirmallas artists intentionally illustrated Keyumars would be an anachronism. The valid academic argument relies on longue durée continuity. The Shahnameh preserves a compressed memory of foundational human experiences: living in cave shelters shaping stone into tool and symbol confronting apex predators and painting rock surfaces. When later societies sought to explain their origins, they drew on this reservoir of memory weaving ancestral triumphs into the single figure of Keyumars.

7- Researcher & Artist Reflection: The Living Hand:

Working on Keyumars for the Persian Art Chronicle means balancing distance with artistic intuition. Looking at the cave profiles of Hotu or the ochre lines at Mirmallas I do not see artifacts. I see the living hands of artists who faced core creative questions: How do we bring form to raw stone? How do we make an indifferent material speak? The palang-pūshī motif has a visual pull. The change from skin to cultural sign marks the very beginning of textiles and body ornamentation as tools of visual communication. In my studio work turning descriptions and Safavid miniature styles into modern visual forms feels like a direct part of transmitting this memory. Combining data with creative practice improves visual perception. The ancient toolmakers in caves were not primitive precursors; they had fully developed cognitive and symbolic abilities. The goal of the Persian Art Chronicle is to make sure these early achievements stay a living part of artistic inquiry.

8- Conclusion:

Keyumars stands as a starting point in visual history. Far from being a folklore character Keyumars is a dynamic conceptual framework through which generations understood the move from nature to culture. Across space, stone technology and body aesthetics the mythic tradition holds a memory of prehistoric life on the plateau. Going from cave shelters to the mythic mountain throne reflects the growth of spatial cognition and authority. The mental steps needed to make geometric microliths match the image of the king taming natural elements. Meanwhile Mirmallas rock art shows a graphic tradition that came long before written literature matching the semiotic change of leopard hide into political charisma. By looking beyond the binary of Christensen's Indo- model and Bahar's Near Eastern synthesis this study places Keyumars in a continuous story of local environmental adaptation. Keyumars stays a center at the core of Iranian artistic consciousness—a primordial blueprint that continues to shape how space, form and identity are understood on the plateau.

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